



## **Women and War Memories during the Nigeria – Biafra civil war: a practicality of textiles.**

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### **Abstract**

*From time immemorial, women have been groomed and trained to take care of domestic affairs in their families. In line with the above, during the time of the missionaries in Igbo land, some women were trained in home keeping, soap making, and cloth making before getting married to know how to take care of their immediate and extended families at large. However, this teaching and its practices which have become part of their lives, were manifested during the Nigeria-Biafra war. Women were not just passive spectators or merely helpless victims of war as some authors have claimed, rather they rendered lots of help in taking care of their family members as they were taught. The significant roles played by them as mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, aunts, cousins, nieces, sisters-in-law, mothers-in-law, sisters, wives, and daughters; physically, spiritually, and otherwise should be recorded, accentuated, and commended instead of calling attention to the moral decadence exhibited by some female folk during the war. Apart from food service, they also took charge of the clothing and textiles aspect which its lack had some negative implications that affected health and other aspects of life. It is on this ground that this study is based. This is qualitative research and the research design is historical and descriptive, I utilized oral interviews and photographs as research instruments to collect some data and also adopted the theories of functionalism and feminism for analysis. I found out that women relentlessly worked hard and used their initiative to create and improvise with some found textile objects to solve the immediate needs of their families during the war. It also reports what women did with their clothing and the scarcity of clothing. I did not fail to document the roles of textiles and jobs women did as regards textile production, to raise funds to take care of their families. The study concludes by voicing out that women were not just tag-a-long but active partakers and stayers who amid this aggression, faced the war under a deplorable condition but utilized it to display a high level of wisdom and creativity which was of utmost help to everyone during the war and after.*

**Keywords:** Nigeria – Biafra war, textiles, women, war memories and clothing.



## **Introduction**

*One of our errors in times past has been our inability to appropriate the positive aspects of the Civil War legacy such as the spirit of innovation and self-reliance that inspired technological feats in extreme circumstances.....Yemi Osinbanjo*

July 6, 1967, was the day, of the 30 months Nigerian Civil War which led to the death of over three million people started and ended on January 15, 1970. This war was fought between the governments of Nigeria and the Secessionist State of Biafra. The Biafra stood for the aspirations of the Igbo, whose leadership felt they could no longer coexist with the then-Northern-dominated federal government. The conflict resulted from The international communities played some roles during this war. World powers like Britain, the former Soviet Union, the United States, and France played key roles in the war with their support for both sides in the conflict. The British government backed the federal forces, also the Soviet Union while the United States of America on their part were neutral. The U.S. government provided military assistance to the Nigerian government. Its government led a movement for relief to millions dying in Biafra and on

political, economic, ethnic, cultural, and religious tensions, which preceded Nigeria's independence from Britain in 1960. Immediate causes of the war were the 1966 January coup and July counter-coup and persecution of the Igbo living in Northern Nigeria as well as control over oil production in the Niger Delta. Biafra comprises the now Southeastern and South-South states of the federation where the Igbo dominated. This country, called Biafra, took its name from the Bight of Biafra (an arm of the Atlantic Ocean) and was established by the Igbo who were of the view that they could not develop or survive in Nigeria.

September 9, 1968, the presidential candidate Richard Nixon, stated, "Until now, efforts to relieve the Biafrans have been thwarted by the desire of the central government of Nigeria to pursue total and unconditional victory and by the fear of the Igbo that surrendered means wholesale atrocities and genocide." Nigeria also received support from Egypt, which provided pilots to fly the aircraft. Biafra was supported by France, Burkina Faso, Vatican City, Israel, Spain,



Portugal, Norway, Rhodesia, and South Africa.

This long and brutal war lasted for 2 years and 6 months. Because of this war, a lot of human basic needs including textiles, clothing, and fashion were affected tremendously due to many historical forces, and most of the textiles and clothing utilized during the Nigeria-Biafra war were improvised or provided by charity organizations (CARITAS) and given away by those who have to those who have none, due to the ban imposed on Biafra by the Nigerian government. Most people were after food to stay alive. The study observed that people never minded appearing in rags provided they had food to eat or give to their children. Nevertheless, they still passed through lots of difficulties due to a lack of textiles, and the few that some had were used for so many other things. These acts have not been sufficiently studied, therefore this study recorded the women and war memories as regards the usefulness of textiles during the Nigeria-Biafra war.

Some researchers have carried out studies on the Nigeria-Biafra war, its causes, strategies,

and lessons learned. Also, some authorities have documented to some extent the roles played by some soldiers, the ammunition used, intellectuals and international communities that rendered some help, and health aid. Some also recorded the roles played by the women, the various waves of abuse a woman's body was subjected to, and the role the woman played in transforming her body from an inordinate object to a site of power, survival, and hope (Yakubu&Olaoye, 2021). How they cooked, fed the whole Biafra nation, and sustained the economy of Biafra through "attack" trade, which involved market trips through enemy front lines has been recorded also. Their infiltration into the Nigerian side, sensitization of the women on the causes of the crisis and keeping them informed on the recent happenings, rehabilitation of war casualties, setting up nurseries, orphanages, civil defense corps, and provision of cooks for the troops have also been recorded by scholars(Achebe,2010). Interestingly, they were not naked while performing all these tasks. It should be noted that foreign clothing and textiles and indigenous textiles in particular were very essential during this war



and played important roles but not much has been documented on their usefulness during the war to the best of this study's knowledge. The main thrust of this paper is to present varied ways in which textiles were utilized by the Biafra during the war. I also record the women's war memories and how they improvised textile materials to meet their basic needs, their children, husbands, and other people's needs at large. From the horrible experiences I noted through this study on the lack of textiles during the war, this study is of the view that war should not be encouraged.

### **Theoretical Background**

The theory of functionalism by Bronislaw Malinowski (developed between 1910 and 1930) states that specific cultural institutions function to support the structure of society or serve the needs of individuals in society. According to Crossman (2016), in the functionalist theory, the different parts of society are primarily composed of social institutions, each of which is designed to fill different needs, and each has particular consequences for the form and shape of the society. From the functionalist point of view,

each part of the society has a function to perform so that the society will be run well. In Biafra land, the women form part of the society and they have their functions which they played during the Nigeria-Biafra war. For example, the significant roles played by women as mothers, grandmothers, great-grandmothers, aunts, cousins, nieces, sisters-in-law, mothers-in-law, sisters, wives, and daughters; physically, spiritually, and otherwise during the war, apart from food service, taking charge of clothing and textiles aspects which their lack had some negative implications that affected health and other aspects of life. The women have also helped to meet the needs of clothing and more during the Biafra war which the men did not do. Through this function, they have been able to solve a basic need which is clothing, by improvising with the little they had and what they found within their immediate environment during the war. These they did to protect as many people as they could within their reach from cold, insect bites, heat, dust, and nakedness. The women are known to have boxes of wrappers which they sold off some pieces in times of difficulty. Some piles of wrappers/ clothes/ fabrics were



exchanged for food and other important articles. While the men were on the battlefield, the women looked after the home front by going the extra mile to fend for their children, taking care of the sick, and newborn, queuing up for food in relief centers, and running with her children into the bush or to another village for safety. The women and girls are part of the society and they helped in one way or the other by taking care of their families throughout the war. They performed their functions as part of society and also served other needs at that difficult time.

The feminist theory which is based on the ideology of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97), in her book 'A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792) challenges the idea that women as a group were in anywhere inferior to men. If they were not as efficient as men, it was only because they were not properly educated and had few opportunities, not because of any fundamental difference in ability. According to Crossman (2016), the feminist theory is most concerned with giving a voice to women and highlighting the various ways women have contributed to society. It is also based on the equal rights of

women with men. Women should be treated equally with their male counterparts socially, politically economically, and so forth. It gives a leading voice to women and criticizes the patriarchal hierarchy, alienation, and marginalization of women's role in society. In line with this theory, women should not just be viewed as passive spectators or merely helpless victims of war as some authors have claimed, rather they rendered lots of help in taking care of their family members and others as they were taught. The men performed their duty on the battlefield while the women had theirs at home. The significant roles played by them in terms of textiles have not been sufficiently researched as the ones played by the males. As mothers, wives, sisters, and grandmothers watched their males go to the battlefield, they hoped they would return home after the fight for freedom, some of them died out of worries before the war ended. While the fighting raged, the women at home filled a variety of roles from managing the children, taking on trade by barter business with the pieces of fabrics they had, weaving with raffia palm to produce some items like mats, and were encouraged to remain homebound as a



support to their men who were called to enlist. This time presented a unique opportunity for women to step into roles of men they had never been able to access before that is the role of breadwinners in the families. Which they never failed in that role. It made them both supportive wives and mothers as well as patriots for the Biafra Nation.

## **Literature Review**

### **Textiles**

The term "textile" is derived from the Latin word *textilis* and the French word *texere* which means to weave (Encyclopedia Britannica). It originally referred to woven fabrics only but recently it has come to include fabrics produced by other methods. Textiles are one of human beings' oldest creations (Bhatt 2014). They are fabrics, cloths, and materials made from fibres, thin threads, or filaments that are natural or synthetic, or a combination of both. It is a type of woven fabric or cloth. Textile is a comprehensive term that includes various fibre-based materials, yarns, filaments, fabric types, threads, etc. They are divided into domestic and technical textiles and are

classified according to their component fibres namely silk, wool, jute, raffia palm, cotton, linen, rayon, nylon, polyester, and some inorganic fibres such as gold, glass fibre, and asbestos cloth. Textiles were major components of age-old economies and communal relationships. Through textiles, clothing which is one of the necessities of life is produced. They are essential for many aspects of life.

### **Textile manufacturing in Nigeria before the Civil War.**

According to Diogu et al (2014), the colonial government established some textile industries before granting independence to Nigeria. To supplement local initiatives in Nigeria's cloth manufacturing, the government gave support for the establishment of more textile and textile-allied industries in different parts of Nigeria. The Nigerian government also established some textile mills in North, East, and Western Nigeria to promote industrial development. Kaduna Textile Mill was the first large mill to be established in 1957, to process the cotton that was largely produced



in the Northern part of Nigeria. They further note that shortly after the independence in 1960, more textile mills were established in different parts of the country. One was the Nigerian Textile Mills, which was established in Lagos in 1962 followed by Aba Textile Mills in 1963 and the then Bendel Mills Ltd, Asaba. By this time production of textiles was in abundance.

These textiles produced by the indigenous textile mills in Nigeria were mostly cotton. Some of these textiles were produced in the country while some of them were imported from foreign countries. These textiles when constructed into clothing were used by Nigerians as apparel. Personal accessories like scarves, hats, blankets, mosquito nets, bags, and other means of carrying objects were also made from textiles. They were used to cover the body from nakedness, insect bites, and sunburn and also protect from cold and harmful objects. Some were also used for decorations and furnishing, for instance, upholstery, rugs, carpets, bed and table linens, towels, curtains, blinds, and other home accessories. Some textiles were used for identification, most especially for uniforms for instance school uniforms, army

uniforms, police, navy and air force uniforms, nurses uniforms, paramilitary uniforms, for various sports uniforms. Also used for ethnic identification. In the aspect of transportation, textiles were used to produce objects like parachutes, kites, sails, the furnishing inside an aircraft, buses, cars, etc. Also in industries some technical textiles, medical textiles (implants), geo-textiles, agro-textiles, and protective clothing (e.g., against heat and radiation for firefighters, molten metals for welders, stab protection, and bulletproof vests). Some finely structured fabrics were used in filtering. For flags, backpacks, tents, nets, handkerchiefs, and rags for dusting, cleaning, and mopping. Thus, textile products were largely utilized extensively in Nigeria before the Civil War. The indigenous textile products which are in the form of woven and dyed fabrics were also constantly produced with hand-spun dyed yarns and factory-made yarns to also serve some purposes.

In health, they are used to produce bandages, swabs, cotton buds, etc. They are also used to produce bank notes. Textiles have also been used for symbolic communication in Nigeria. They present to the onlooker some symbolic



motifs which represent something special in a particular culture. They help to showcase, highlight, and project a particular cultural worldview to the outside world. They pass lots of messages to the onlooker. The expensive ones depict prestige, wealth, and power, and most people boast of the number of boxes containing clothes they have acquired. Many people in Nigeria traded on cloth as a means of livelihood. Textiles have been an integral part of everyday life in Nigeria since the olden days. It serves a lot of purposes because it is flexible. It can be wrapped tightly or loosely on the body, woven, knitted to stretch and conform to changing shapes, or even pieced together and combined with other materials to create various items.

According to Ademiluyi (2016), for a long time, the textile, apparel, and footwear industry in Nigeria, played a significant role in the manufacturing sector of the Nigerian economy. She further reports that it hit a record of over 140 companies and Nigerian textile witnessed a boom in the 1960s to 1970s with textile companies like Kaduna Textiles, Kano Textiles, United Nigeria Textiles, Aba Textiles, Texlon Nigeria

Limited, First Spinners Limited, Bendel Textile Mill, Asaba among others. These gave employment to about 15 million people and this also contributed about 15 percent of the manufacturing sector earnings to the GDP of the Nigerian economy and accounted for over 60% of the textile industry capacity in West Africa.

According to Nwodo (2017), there was national unity before the war. One could find a Biafran as a member of the Northern Nigeria House of Chiefs. Biafrans were living and working freely and investing in every part of Nigeria including the textile industries. For instance, Dr. Nnamdi Azikiwe (from the southeast) was elected leader of government business in Lagos (South West). Mazi Mbonu Ojike (from the southeast) was elected as the Deputy Speaker in Nigeria. Alhaji Umoru Altine (a Fulani man) was elected as Mayor of Enugu (found in southeastern Nigeria) while Mr. Willoughby a Yoruba man was Accountant General in Nigeria.

He further reports that on the economic front, the economy of the country was buoyant. Import substitution industries were very



profitable and grew rapidly. In the North, groundnut production fueled economic growth through exports. Textile industries in Nigeria flourished and agriculture boomed. Ahmadu Bello University which was built using the proceeds from the groundnut export by Ahmadu Bello thrived with an outstanding international reputation.

In the entire Western Region of Nigeria, tremendous growth was recorded. Cocoa was exported and this was a dependable foreign exchange earner. Products like cement, soft drinks, rubber, beer, soap, and other import substitution industries grew rapidly. The major universities in the West, which are the Universities of Lagos, Ibadan and Ife were of world standards. The first television station in black Africa was built and the first stadium in Nigeria was also built in the Western part of Nigeria. Nigeria was booming in affluence before the civil war.

In the Eastern Region, palm produce was used to grow the Eastern economy. There was coal mining and its exportation in Enugu.

Factories of beer, cement, cashew nuts, tires, aluminum, steel, and soft drinks grew rapidly. University of Nigeria, Nsukka was built by the Eastern Region and run by Americans. All these achievements mentioned above were before the Civil War.

### **Textiles and Nigeria-Biafra war**

Most of the Biafra population was deprived of the necessities of life such as food, shelter, clothing, and other vital goods during the war which Nigeria had in abundance. Thus, during this war, the production of textiles and fashion in terms of clothing was affected tremendously due to many factors. In the Biafra wartime, clothing and fashion were largely determined by necessity. Since food and shelter were the most important. The necessity for clothing was a minimum wardrobe of the clothes acquired before the war which could be easily transferrable in case of long treks. Throughout this war, the function of clothes overpowered the form of those clothes and fabrics



Plate 1: People of Biafra in transit. Note the usage of textiles in tying up their luggage.  
Source: <https://qz.com/africa/998222/biafra-nigerians-needs-to-talk-about-the-horrors-of-the-war-50-years-later>



Plate II: Igbo history- Biafran orphans at a food distribution centers in Mbaise Imo State, Nigeria.  
Note the piece of fabric used to tie the younger one at the back.

Source: <https://www.google.com/search?q=nigeria%20biafra%20war&udm=2&uds=>



The Biafrans did not focus on conspicuous consumption, instead, they focused on practicality. During the period of this war, there was a focus on war-related textiles such as recruiting some able-bodied men to construct some sacks with jute fabric. These sacks were used as carriages for bullets and for carrying other war-related items. It was used because of the tensile strength of the jute fibre. There were not enough havo sacks and khaki fabrics which are usually utilized to produce bags for putting bullets for the soldiers. The textile industry in Aba was forced to shut down during the Nigeria-Biafra Civil War because people feared for their lives. Many also lost their jobs due to the forced recruitment into the Biafra army which consists of only males of different ages.

### **Method**

This is qualitative research and the research design is a case study, I utilized oral interviews and photographs as research instruments to collect some data and also adopted the theories of functionalism and feminism for analysis.

### **Discussion and findings**

Clothing, shelter, and food are the necessities of life. During most wars globally, these three are usually affected. Most people are usually displaced from their homes and they flee to refuge centres or relief centres, die of hunger and often fall ill and may lose their lives because of overexposure of the skin to the weather due to lack of clothing. This study found out that Clothing was an issue during the Civil War in that many lost theirs due to long-distance treks (in which many of them were injured due to overexposure of their feet to heat and other dangerous objects), hunger, and walking. They trekked on bare feet for so

many miles. They would carry as much as they could and somewhere along the line, they would abandon some as a result of incessant running from one place to another for safety. As they scampered for safety, some of them abandoned their properties, clothing inclusive. Others also fled their homes without taking any form of clothing with them except the ones worn on their bodies. As a result of these, those who did not possess any have to depend on those they ran to their villages to seek refuge to clothe them. People were also taught to manage their old clothing as newer ones were very difficult to come by. Although some of the missionaries and foreign aids like (CARITAS) distributed some clothes among other things, they were not enough to get to everyone in Biafra land. Some people as narrated by Sir Nwigwe (2017) in an interview, had to sell their clothing to those who did not have it, and those who had but saved enough money before the war broke out sold some of their clothing and fabrics to feed. Without this act by the women, the family will starve to death or be exposed to kwashiorkor.

The adults had to depend on others for clothes. The children were not left out, due to lack of clothes, most of them were not properly clothed to shield them from cold, insect bites, heat, and other dangerous objects. Therefore, they suffered a lot. Although some of them were afflicted with kwashiorkor, they also suffered from hypothermia and malaria due to these harmful elements of weather and mosquito bites. There was a lack of protective clothing but the women had to cut most of their wrappers to stitch up what to use and clothe their children. People wore torn clothes during the war. Sir Nwigwe mentioned that



wearing rags was very common during the war. As such, clothes were not burned or thrown away into landfills as it is nowadays but were continuously made use of even if they were torn into pieces. Pieces of wrappers were also used to tie up some goods for easy carriage, due to lack of boxes and bags. The women usually sacrificed their wrappers to be used as carrier bags during transits from one village to the other.

According to the interview with Sir Nwigwe (2017), he revealed that the Biafran soldiers did not have enough uniforms. Uniforms are constructed out of textiles. And there was a lack of it during the war. Most of these soldiers were not properly kitted in their appropriate uniforms and this affected them. Only a few of them had the appropriate uniforms except for the ones they removed from some Nigerian soldiers they caught. He further mentions that uniforms are very important and foster traits that are necessary for a person as an individual and an organization as a whole to thrive and prosper. There is also a feeling of equality, which brings everyone to the same level, no matter how poor or rich, and it inculcates a feeling of equality among those wearing the uniform. He also mentions that it is also considered an honor to be adorned in an army uniform. One cannot talk about the military without mentioning their uniforms. Ryan (2015) defines uniform as a set of standard clothing worn by members of an organization while participating in that organization's activity. It means to be the same, without any difference. They depict solidarity, and this has been this way starting from the days of the Roman Empire to modern-day manufacturing houses. Uniforms as Osburn (2014) observed, serve as a form of identity, a

standard of authority and responsibility. It identifies the branch of service, rank and authority, skills, job assignments, and achievements.

The Biafrans' uniforms were not enough and were of low quality. This study found out that they were dyed with bitter leaves. There was nothing like a binder to fix the dye to the fabric so the dyed fabric could not last after a short while once it was washed. They used this dye to see if they could achieve a kind of camouflage effect, an army green colour. This was done in the Orlu sector. They were responsible for the uniforms. (Culled from the interview granted to Mr. B.O. Njelita (graphic artist) by Mr. Chidi Onwuekwe). He was a member of the Biafra propaganda unit. He and his team members designed materials like posters and prepared scripts for the radio Biafra. They were mobile and not stationed at a place). The actual army uniforms are known to be distinctive. Their own could not stand the wear and tear of war activities. These made them wear rag uniforms and were tagged "ragtag soldiers" (S.I.Nwigwe-interviewee). At a point, no confidence, joy, or pride comes when one puts on a proper uniform. They were not also protected from some dangers faced during the war due to unprotected clothing. As a result of this, many died carelessly while fighting.

According to Uwakwe (2017) another interviewee, he buttressed what Sir Nwigwe, an interviewee says and mentions that most Biafran soldiers did not have sufficient uniforms. He further mentions that among 100 soldiers, it was very difficult to find five among them in uniforms. Some of them went as far as collecting some leaves and stems from trees, boiled them, and used the water for dyeing their uniforms and pairs of white

canvas. Most of them never saw or made use of soldiers' boots rather they wore pairs of canvas which always tore because they were not as strong as the soldiers' boots and were not meant for that purpose. This act exposed a lot of them to dangerous objects during the war like thorns, sharp blades, pieces of iron,

tree stumps, snake bites, scorpion stings, and blisters as a result of excessive trekking, and so on. It is said that the hood does not make a monk but it gives him an identity. In this case, the uniforms do not showcase strength or experience, but identity, and this identity was lost because of the lack of uniforms.

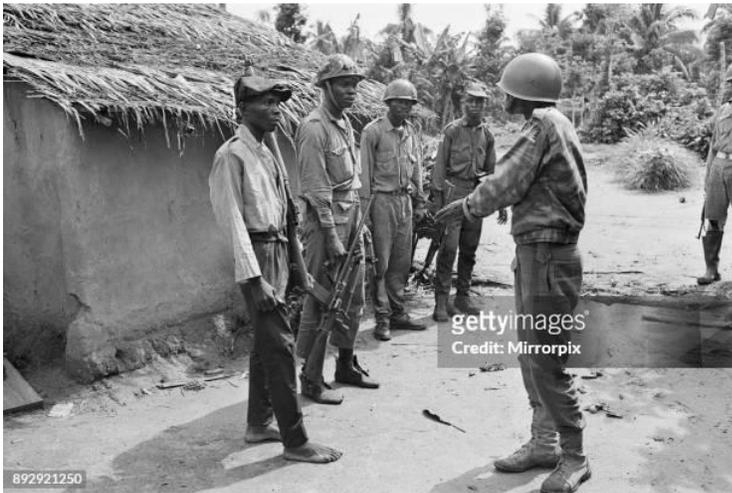


Plate III: some Biafra soldiers.

Source: <https://www.gettyimages.com/photos/soldier-of-biafra>

Note the uniforms and their boots, they were not befitting of a soldier.



Plate IV: Some Biafra soldiers.

Source: <https://www.gettyimages.com/photos/soldier-of-biafra>

Note that some of them never had uniforms or boots as one could see in this picture above.

This paper reveals that before the war, the women in particular made use of ceiling fan brand hair thread which was manufactured in the Republic of China. This hair thread is made from 100% cotton fibre but it is dyed black to match the average natural colour of an Igbo woman's hair. The colour of the thread is black-glazed. The length of one piece is 91.44m and weighs 7 grams. It is waterproof and high-temperature resistant.

They were usually packed in a small dark blue paper packet. One could find packages of one dozen, ½ gross (72), and 40 gross which were exported to different countries in West Africa. The packing sizes were as follows: small paper packet, middle paper packet, and export carton. This hair thread was made to be so strong that it could be reused after several plaiting. It was found to be durable.



Plate V: African hair thread.



Source: <https://lojusfit.co.uk/products/5-10-african-hair-threads-afro-hair-extension-braiding-weaving-wig-attachment-human-threading-sewing-black-natural-hair-plaiting-bob-marley>

During the Nigeria-Biafra war, these threads were not imported into Biafra so the women had no choice other than to improvise with what they could find in their immediate environment which was raffia palm fibre. Lady Uchegbu(2020) an interviewee, records that the raffia fibre has traditionally been used for tying up plants, and for making shoes, handbags, placemats, baskets, and many other household items. It can be crocheted, knitted, twined, and knotted. It is obtained from the raffia (raphia) palm tree which grows in tropical regions in Africa, Madagascar, and the Philippines. The raffia palm (*Raphia farinifera*) consists of long leaves that can attain 60ft (18m), which makes it the palm tree with the largest branches. Each palm branch is made up of nearly 100 leaflets, which are cut and torn off

in parallel lines yielding long continuous fibre of a pale green colour. The fibres that were used by the women in hair plaiting and woven fabrics were gathered from the bark of the new leaves that had just emerged from the stems and were still closed in a spear shape. She attested to using it to plait her hair.

These raffia fibres were not twisted rather as mentioned earlier they were peeled from the new leaves to produce a waterproof material which was dyed using rusted iron to black in the nearby streams. They were first of all boiled and soaked in a basket in a stream for several hours. They usually turn black the next day. After the dyeing, they were brought out, dried, and used for plaiting hair (Lady Keziah Igwe and Lady Love Uchegbu during an interview).



Plate VI: Raffia fibre

Source: [https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&sca\\_esv=0498115c76c36171](https://www.google.com/search?client=firefox-b-d&sca_esv=0498115c76c36171)

The raffia fibres were also used in weaving on a vertical loom. The entire raffia plant was used for various purposes ranging from use in textiles to basket weaving to building materials. During the war, the raffia palm and oil palm tree fronds were used as strings by twisting them into a two-fold yarn with the aid of human palms and thighs. The leaf stems and axis of a compound leaf or compound inflorescence were utilized in constructing materials for houses and furniture while the leaf stems' skin was used

for weaving baskets after being removed and torn into pieces.

The raffia fibres woven in the loom were used to produce bags, back chairs and clothes, and other household items. Some of them were sold for money. These particular skills were taught in schools before the war according to Sir Nwigwe (2017). So, during the war, the women made use of that skill to produce some items which were sold to raise some money for the benefit of their families. The vertical looms utilized during the war for weaving were also fabricated with the stems



of the raffia palm because no one could go and fell trees to produce some wooden planks which would be used to fabricate looms. They improvised with raffia stems in place of wood. According to him, most people had raffia palm trees in their compounds. They were very handy and useful not only for tapping wine but also for several purposes.

In dyeing raffia fibers for weaving bags, local dyes were utilized; for instance, charcoal was used to achieve different shades of black, sand and mud were used to achieve different shades of brown and yellow, and leaves were used to achieve different shades of green. Some bark of trees (otiri plant) produced red while the ordinary blue used in staining white clothes to achieve a light bluish-white was used to dye the raffia palm blue. The uri/uli plant utilized by the Igbo women in drawing some decorative symbols on the body was not left out in that it was also utilized in dyeing the raffia fibres to achieve a certain colour known as indigo.

Lady Igwe (2018) an interviewee, mentions that crotchets that were sparingly found in the bags containing relief materials supplied by CARITAS were used to crotchet some wears

for children and some adults by the women. In the absence of these, the coconut leaf or raffia palm leaf mid-rib was used by women and girls as knitting pins to knit some clothing. A times needles and buttons were also found. These needles were used to sew underwear like pants from pieces of wrappers and cloth, which they wore throughout the war. The women improvised what could serve the same purpose as pants.

The sponge utilized in washing and bathing was produced and improvised by the women from the palm fibre obtained from the oil palm's vascular bundles in the empty fruit bunch which could ordinarily be seen as waste products. Once the fresh fruit bunch (FFB) has been removed the empty fruit bunch (EFB) is considered useless. The empty fruit bunch was beaten, placed in a basket, and soaked in a flowing stream to wash off the shiny particles that bound the fibre. After some days, they are washed off and used as a sponge for bathing and washing plates, pots, etc.

There is another sponge made from fuffa (loofah) – a gem of tropical and subtropical vines in the pumpkin (cucurbitaceae) family.



The fully developed fruit is the source of the loofah scrubbing sponge which was used in bathrooms and kitchens by the women. If the loofah is allowed to fully ripen and then dry out on the vine, the flesh disappears leaving only the fibrous skeleton and seeds which can easily be shaken out. This sponge were growing in the bushes in Biafra land and was used as body scrub and for washing kitchen utensils. They were also utilized as sieves for palm wine and palm oil. After sieving, it becomes very clear and free of particles.

Floridata (2015) loofah is a rampant, fast-growing annual vine that produces pretty yellow flowers and strange-looking fruits that are edible when immature in some countries and used as scrubbers or sponges when fully mature. They grow like weeds and need little

more than a sunny spot and something to climb on. The vine can get more than 30ft (9m) long and scrambles over anything in its path. The large leaves are lobed and have silvery patches on the topsides. The fruits are green cylindrical, smooth, and shaped like a club, slighter and wider on one end. The smaller fruits look like little cucumbers. The older fruits eventually dry and turn brown and papery and are ready for harvesting after a 140-180-day growing season. It is washed and made ready for use. There was also a plant known as Ogbo. The stem is usually cut and beaten till it becomes flat. It is soaked in water for several days to soften it further and remove some excess slimy liquid that binds the fibres together. After this process, it is ready to be used as a sponge for washing purposes.

The sample of the loofah plant and sponge are placed below:

	
<p>Plate VII: loofah plant. Source: wikipedia</p>	<p>Plate VIII: loofah sponge Source: goodhousekeeping.com</p>

Sir Nwigwe witnessed during the war how the young men were hidden in the swamps while the young girls were hidden in the rooms. He mentions that holes were dug by their relatives and covered with palm fronds or they were hidden in nearby bushes because of the 3rd marine commandos who were always looking for young men to recruit and girls to take away with them. Most times some specific colours of fabrics were tied on some branches of trees to indicate where the young men were hidden. This act enables the women who normally take food to them in the bush to easily identify their hiding places without much delay. The planes were covered with palm fronds when they were

parked after each operation to avoid destruction by the Nigerian army. Rooftops were covered with palm fronds as camouflage clothing – and also cars. Big holes were dug to contain some valuable properties and also covered with palm fronds so that no one would see them. Some of the Biafran soldiers according to Sir Nwigwe in an interview were also looking for some valuables to cart away since a war period is always lawless.

Due to the lack of mattresses and pillows during the war, jute fibre was used by the women to fabricate local mattresses with improvised needles because most people



were not sleeping on the bare floors for various health reasons like prevention from cold and harmful insect stings and bites. They were sewn together and later filled with dry elephant grasses which attracted a lot of bed bugs. Jute fabric was used as the backing of the mattresses and later calico was introduced for those who could get access to it. Mattresses and pillows made with jute and stuffed with dry elephant grasses were used to improvise due to the lack of foam and proper fabrics for producing appropriate mattresses and pillows fit for human usage. People had to trek long distances for instance, from Enugu to Owerri. There were no vehicles for mass transit. Some of them who had bicycles rode them for days while traveling from one area to the other. Mr. Uwakwe, an interviewee, narrated an incident on how he tied his bicycle with his cloth to his leg in one of his journeys in the night to the city of Enugu from Owerri to avoid his bicycle from being stolen. As a result of this long journey with a bicycle, they had torn shoes and clothes. As they slept on the way during their journey, they were bitten by dangerous insects because they were not clothed properly since they utilized their

clothing to tie their bicycles to their legs. They also had swollen legs and could not carry their belongings thus most of their valuables were abandoned on their way to seek refuge in the places they felt they would be safe.

Many people found it difficult to put on some shoes due to lack of it. This caused them to incur some wounds and blisters during the long treks and walks from one area to another. Slippers and shoes were improvised by cutting some pieces of used tires and fabricating them into useful pairs of footwear. The African Oil bean (*Pentaclethra macrophylla* Benth) pods were in some cases utilized to fabricate some footwear using the roots of raffia palm as straps because they were found to be very strong. This oil bean tree is native to the tropical regions of Africa and has been cultivated since 1937. It has glossy brown seeds which are the most widely used part of the oil bean tree, they are usually an average of eight in number and are contained in a flattened pod that explodes when ripe, dispersing the seeds all over the area close to where the tree is situated. The pods are dark brown, hard, and woody in appearance.

The pictures of the African oil bean tree and its fruits are placed below:

	
<p>Plate IX: African oil bean tree Source: steemit.com</p>	<p>Plate X: African oil bean seeds and pods. Source: hintng.com</p>

In the production of planes by the Biafrans, textiles also played its part in that some fabrics were used for furnishing the interiors (the seats) of the planes. Textiles were also used to improvise some parachutes for dropping some soldiers and foodstuffs in some areas. During the Civil War, tents were used in humanitarian emergencies. The cotton canvas tent allows functional breathability while serving the purpose of temporary shelter. In some areas, palm fronds were used to construct tents in some refugee camps.

Textiles have always been part of healthcare, especially during the war. They were used in hospitals during the war for the care and safety of staff and patients. Most of these

healthcare and hygiene textiles are adult incontinence pads, rectangular pads, urine collector and bags, feminine maternity pads, nursing wipes, gauze, wound dressing, surgical drapes, gowns, plaster, face masks, operation room table and tray covers, headwear, under pads, x-ray gowns, patient exam gowns, barriers and isolation gowns, super absorbent fabrics, etc. There were also napkins, blankets, baby blankets, mackintosh, most toilet tissues, window cloths, disinfectant wipes, rags/mops for cleaning, pillow sheets, bed sheets, protective clothing, stretchers, filter materials, children's blankets, etc. According to Lady Uchegbu, during the war, sanitary towels were not available for people to use; so they



had to improvise by cutting their wrappers into tiny square pieces. , most females used sanitary pads during their menstruation periods. She further reports that cotton was also wrapped in pieces of cloth and used as pads. These fabrics were reusable in that they were washed after each use, dried under the sun, and folded for keeps. This particular method was also used as napkins for babies and also for maternity wipes in the labour room. Instead of cotton napkins, which were very scarce and could hardly be found, women gave up their wrappers to be cut and used for napkins because they were hundred 100 cotton and highly absorbent. She further mentions that those who did not have wrappers to cut stayed at home during their periods and kept on washing once the blood started dripping. She further mentions that this situation was quite worrisome, uncomfortable, and disturbing. The nursing mothers also used up their expensive wrappers as coverings and blankets for their newborns. Some women did the same to their grown-ups. Textiles were used as the Biafran flag which bears yellow, black, red, and green colours with the rising sun. That flag serves as a form of identity for the Biafrans. The flag

consists of a piece of cloth decorated with the Biafran emblem used as a visual signal.

The white cotton fabric used in bagging salt was used for straining water and also for filtering water to make it fit for drinking since some people could barely see pure drinking water. Jute fabric was also used in bagging salted stock fish which was brought into Biafra by some charitable organizations. They supplied medicine, fish, salt, cornmeal, and stock fish salted and unsalted which needed to be distributed to other places. Textiles were used for packaging these food items so as for easy packaging and transporting them to other places during this war.

Lady Uchegbu mentioned during the interview that ropes and strings were improvised by women, they used some plant fibers from jute, hemp flax, and others to produce them. Some plants were beaten and soaked in water/stream for days to produce strong ropes for various purposes. The rope had a lot of tensile strength used for tying sacks. It was also fastened to an anchor for crossing borders. This strong rope was used in crossing from one area to another place



especially where some deep rivers and streams do not have bridges and are not a large body of water. They were also used to start up some engines. Textiles had a lot of impact on Biafrans during the Civil War which tremendously helped in the health sector as clothing, shelter, household articles, and also aided in transportation. According to Oyibode (2017), on May 19, 1968, Port Harcourt was captured and the indigenous cloth industry of the Igbo in Akwete Town which is very close to Port Harcourt was captured. Almost a year later, the war started which shows that the Biafrans lacked clothes during this war. Textile weavers in Igbo land lost their jobs because of the war situation. There was a lack of materials to be used for the weaving. Those that wove lowered their prices so that they could sell but the cost of production remained the same because the techniques used by the weavers did not change and their yarns were hand spun. The quality of life for the weavers was reduced drastically because there was no work to be done, lack of food, starvation, and a chaotic environment that besieged Igbo areas. He also reports that amid this horrendous crisis, tears, and starvation, the Biafran flag made of

fabrics was still flying across the Biafra-designated states. Men, women, and children waved the flag hoping for victory and the full independence of the Biafra Republic. This was a hope borne from the very depth of their souls and the dream of a nation whose sun would one day rise high to shine forth glory for the world to see. Okafor (2001) mentions the case of abandoned property. He asked: How can one consider his property abandoned in his own country? But this happened. The Igbo lost a lot of properties including textiles in the form of chair cushions, curtains, clothes, wrappers, undies, bed sheets, blankets, pillows and covers, towels, mattresses, and mosquito nets to mention but a few. Sir S.I. Nwigwe was one of the interviewees who lost his house and all his household belongings in Ogoni, Rivers State. One could not imagine a house without textiles and the war situation without textiles. But all these were abandoned due to the war. The owners had to start life afresh by procuring all these after the war, while those who never worked for them inherited them by force. The case of abandoned property with all the household items dealt a big blow to the Biafrans.



## **Conclusion**

Textiles and fashion often reflect lifestyles and values. During the Biafra War, lifestyles changed and so did the clothing and textiles of that time. Because of the harsh economic times and lack of importation of goods into Biafra, most of the textiles utilized during that time were clothes people had, and most of the few imported by some voluntary organizations did not get to the reach of everyone and were managed by the women to compensate for their original.

Textiles played a lot of significant roles in Biafra during the Nigeria-Biafra War which includes clothing, household textiles, Biafra flags and uniforms, health textiles, parts of some equipment for war, camouflage, protection and tying up their belongings when moving from one place to the other to

mention but a few. However, many people that lost their lives were not as a result of bullets, but the situation they passed through. Most people moving from one place to the other had no footwear, no clothing, some wore torn clothes and as a result of this, they developed sores and wounds on their feet and toes, some also became very ill, some of which were not well treated, got infected and died. Therefore, the lack of textiles and clothing was felt during the war and the little people had, were also utilized by them judiciously. The women had to improvise a lot of things to help out with what they could not have access to because of the war. Thereby presenting the women as active partakers and stayers who amid this aggression, faced the war under a deplorable condition but utilized it to display a high level of wisdom and creativity.

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Those that were interviewed:

Chika Chudi-Duru (interviewer), Sir S.I. Nwigwe (interviewee) (90 years of age)

Chika Chudi-Duru (interviewer), Lady L.C. Uchegbu (interviewee) (75 years of age)

Chika Chudi-Duru (interviewer), Lady K. Igwe (interviewee) (80 years of age)

Chika Chudi-Duru (interviewer), Mr. Uwakwe (interviewee) (77 years of age)

Chidi Onwuekwe (interviewer), Mr. Benjamin Osita Njelita (interviewee) (80 years + of age)



Chika Chudi-Duru (interviewer), Chidi Onwuekwe (interviewee) a PhD candidate, working on Graphic novel in Joseph Achuzia exploits in Nigeria-Biafra Conflict.

Chika Chudi-Duru (interviewer), Mr. Chidi Onyebuchi (interviewee)

Chika Chudi-Duru (interviewer), Mrs. Martha Akwaa (interviewee)

Chika Chudi-Duru (interviewer), Mr. Benjamin ole (interviewee)

Chika Chudi-Duru (interviewer), Mrs. E. Ifejika (interviewee)